

# Wildlife Sanctuaries of Rajasthan

BY

K. S. SANKHALA

*Department of Forests, Rajasthan, Jaipur*

*(With two plates)*

Rajasthan has established eight Wildlife Sanctuaries for the casual observer, the naturalist, and the wildlife photographer and is managing them on scientific lines. The paper gives a short description of each.

## INTRODUCTION

Rajasthan ranks high in wildlife potential. Its pleasant climate for the greater part of the year, dry deciduous forests, open patches of growing grass, and the agricultural pattern provide an excellent habitat for wildlife. The long leafless period, the dried-up undergrowth, and the few waterholes form an ideal combination for wildlife observation and photography.

The State is situated between 23.3° and 31.12° N. and 69.30° and 78.17° E., and extends over 344,000 hectares. The south and south-eastern parts are hilly; the north and north-western regions form the true Indian desert. The climate is characterised by hot weather during May and June when the temperature rises to 108° F. The winters are pleasant. The desert areas exhibit extremes of temperature; sometimes it rises to 123° F. (Pachpadra) in May and falls to 24° F. (Jaisalmer) in January. Rain is uncertain and scanty. The average rainfall is 25 in. and rainy days are hardly 20 to 30 in the year. Sometimes the whole year passes without a single drop of rain.

The vegetation changes from the tropical semi-evergreen forests of Mt. Abu, the tropical dry deciduous teak (*Tectona grandis*) forests of Banswara, and the tropical dry deciduous *Anogeissus pendula* forests of the Aravalis to the tropical dry deciduous thorn forests of the desert zone. In the extreme north, there are only shifting sand

dunes and scrub of *Calligonum polygonoides*, *Leptadenia spartium*, and *Calotropis procera*. The agricultural pattern changes from the intensive rice cultivation of Doongarpur and Baran to the 'mere gamble' with a handful of bajra seed in the sand dunes of the desert region. Animal husbandry is extensively practised in the west; large herds of sheep, goat, and camel are maintained and the people lead a nomadic life.

The State presents an interesting collection of animals and birds, including Tiger (*Panthera tigris*), Panther (*Panthera pardus*), Caracal (*Felis caracal*), and Sloth Bear (*Melursus ursinus*). Chinkara (*Gazella gazella*), Blackbuck (*Antilope cervicapra*), and Nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*) are fairly common and prefer the drier and open areas. Chousingha (*Tetracerus quadricornis*), the only species of its genus, is another antelope met with. They live near waterholes. Sambar (*Cervus unicolor*) and Chital (*Axix axis*) are found in the forest areas of the inner Aravalis and the Vindhyan ranges. Their distribution is more marked in the Chambal ravines from Kota to Dholpur. Hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*), Jackal (*Canis aureus*), Indian fox (*Vulpes bengalensis*), Mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsii*), Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*). Common Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*) are common. Wolves (*Canis lupus*) and desert fox (*Vulpes vulpes pusilla*) are confined to the desert areas. Indian Hare (*Lepus nigricollis*) and Desert Hare (*L. nigricollis dayanus*), Porcupine (*Hystrix indica*), and a large variety of gerbilles, rats, mice, etc. are the common rodents found in the State. Indian Pangolin (*Manis crassicaudata*) has also been reported from a variety of habitats.

The avifauna of the State is even richer. It is the true home of the peacock (*Pavo cristatus*), the Great Indian Bustard (*Choriotis nigriceps*), and the blue rock pigeon (*Columba livia*). Resident game birds, like grey partridge (*Francolinus pondicerianus*), Indian Sandgrouse (*Pterocles exustus*), Painted Sandgrouse (*P. indicus*), quail (*Coturnix* spp.), green pigeons (*Treron phoenicoptera*) are quite conspicuous. Large numbers of migratory birds arrive during winter. The commonest of them are duck, teal, geese, cranes, Imperial Sandgrouse (*Pterocles orientalis*), Houbara (*Chlamydotis undulata macqueenii*), Florican (*Sypheotides indica*), and many wagtails, bushchats, larks, starlings, etc.

Formerly wildlife was strictly preserved in the various States of Rajasthan, but it was mainly for the sport of the princes. At times, wild boar, chinkara, sambar, and even tiger and panther were preserved at the cost of the poor farmers, for which they never got any compensation. Since the old order has changed, a new concept

must prevail. If wildlife is to be preserved, it has to be at State cost, within State limits, for the benefit of all and without interfering with the rights and privileges of the individual.

The State Government is conscious of the new concept and harmful species have been posted as pest or vermin, and others facing extinction have been notified as protected. Large tracts of State forest (c. 270 sq. miles) have been notified as reserved areas, where shooting, hunting, netting, trapping, etc. are strictly prohibited. The eight reserved areas are: Sariska in Alwar; Van Vihar-Ram Sagar, and Ghana in Bharatpur; Sawai-Madhapur in Sawai-Madhapur; Darrah in Kota; Jai Samand in Udaipur; and Mount Abu in Sirohi district. They are popularly known as Wildlife Sanctuaries where special arrangements have been made to develop and protect the animal life of the area. To this list, two more are to be added shortly, one at Talchaper in Bikaner for the preservation of Blackbuck and the other in Jaisalmer for the Great Indian Bustard.

#### SARISKA

Sariska is Rajasthan's outstanding Wildlife Sanctuary. It is situated on the National Highway No. 8 (Delhi-Jaipur) 125 miles from Delhi. It extends over approximately 80 sq. miles of forest. Dhok (*Anogeissus pendula*) is the main species of these forests but pure stands of Salar (*Boswellia serrata*) grow on the steeper and drier slopes. Bottom lands support Dhak (*Butea monosperma*), *Zizyphus* spp., and Khair (*Acacia catechu*). The forest covers three main valleys: Kalighati, Siliberi, and Sariska. These valleys have wooded hill slopes and the landscape of rolling hills presents a picturesque setting (Plate I).

The sanctuary is rich in wildlife. Sambar, nilgai, chousingha, chinkara, wild boar, tiger, and panther are common and can be conveniently seen from the sanctuary roads or from observation towers. Special arrangements have been made to show tigers on the kill under searchlight from safe and comfortable machans. For bird watchers the sanctuary is still more interesting. Partridge, quail, and sandgrouse, which are normally very wary, move quite freely on the roads and paths. Other birds, like peacock and green pigeon, are quite common.

The sanctuary is well netted with fair-weather roads. One enjoys the rare sight of sambar, herds of nilgai, and wild boar retreating to the hills from pastures in the morning, whereas night drives open the entire jungle book page by page.

Sariska is historically important also. The recent excavations of *Garh* are attracting a number of amateur archaeologists. The new finds are old temples of the tenth century A.D. The abandoned fort of Kankwari is another historical place where Dara got asylum when Aurangzeb was hunting for him.

Sariska is very popular, being easily reached by road. The well-furnished forest rest houses are electrified and cater for the visitors' comfort.

#### VAN VIHAR-RAM SAGAR

Van Vihar and Ram Sagar, the finest shooting blocks of the late Maharaja of Dholpur, were very rich in wild life. His interest in wild animals and birds was so great that his evening drive to feed the creatures was a *must*. He would take various types of food to feed sambar, chital, chinkara, and even tiger, panther, and jackal from the roadside. Coveys of partridges used to await the Maharaja's arrival.

This preservation received a fatal blow during the transitional period of the transfer of political power and the integration of the princely States. Very many of these semi-tame creatures were massacred by poachers. In 1955, however, these were made reserved areas under the Rajasthan Wild Animals and Birds Protection Act, 1951.

These reserved areas are now popularly known as Van Vihar and Ram Sagar Wildlife Sanctuaries. Since the sanctuaries have similar fauna, flora, and topography I have treated them as one unit and described them as Van Vihar-Ram Sagar Sanctuary. The Sanctuary is situated 170 miles from New Delhi and about 50 miles from Agra. It is connected with Delhi-Madras National Highway No. 3 at Dholpur by a 12-mile link road. It extends over 20 sq. miles of low and well-clothed hills of the Vindhyan series. The forest consists of pure crop of Dhok with Khair as its principal associate.

The well-furnished and electrified forest-lodge of Van Vihar overlooks a small lake where herds of chital, sambar, and wild boar come to drink even during the day. They come close to, and provide chances for easy photography from, the lodge terrace. A visit to Shahjahan's hunting lodge and boating in the Ram Sagar lake are really interesting.

#### DARRAH

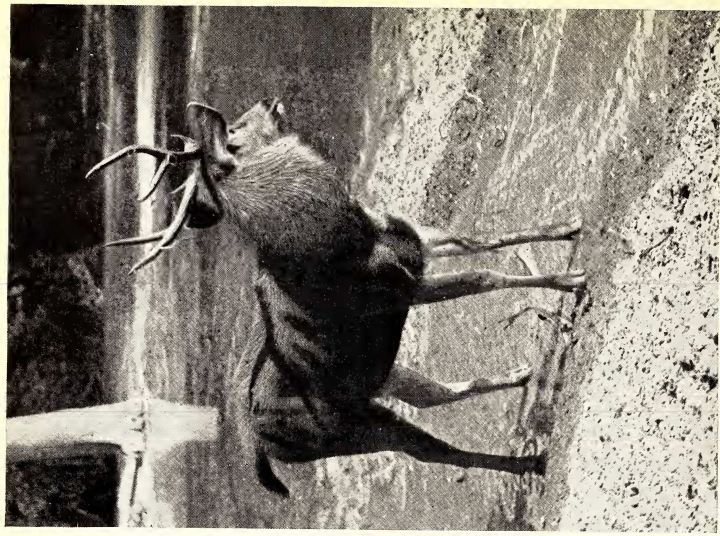
The Sanctuary is situated 30 miles south of Kota City on Kota-Indore road in the well-wooded Girdharpura Valley. Dhok, Khair,



Dry deciduous forest—Sariska

*Photo : K. S. Sankhala*





Sambar at waterhole—Van Vihar



Tiger at kill—Sariska

Dhak, Karaya (*Sterculia urens*), Bahera (*Terminalia belerica*), Tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), Gurjan (*Lannea grandis*), Khirni (*Wrightia tinctoria*) are some of the common trees of the sanctuary. It is famous for chital, nilgai, wild boar, sambar, bear, and tiger. Panther and chinkara also occur. Spurfowl, black and grey partridge, and quail are seen everywhere. Old forts, a museum, the Gandhi Sagar Dam, the Kota Barrage, and big game shooting in Kota forests are some of the other attractions.

#### SAWAI-MADHOPUR

The Sanctuary is situated about 6 miles to the east of Sawai-Madhopur Railway Station. It extends over 60 sq. miles of well-covered rolling hills, flat tops, and narrow valleys of the Aravali ranges. The forests consist of pure crop of Dhok with Khair and Tendu as its associates. The sanctuary abounds in sambar, chital and nilgai, tiger and panther. Wild boar, sloth bear, and chinkara are also found.

The sanctuary is approachable by road from Jaipur only during non-monsoon period. Several fair-weather roads connect all the areas of the sanctuary but they open only after December. The historic and invincible Ranthambhor Fort of Rana Hamir, situated in the heart of the sanctuary, is a big attraction for tourists.

#### JAI SAMAND

The Sanctuary is situated 32 miles south of Udaipur City on Udaipur-Salumbar road. It extends over 20 sq. miles covering well-clothed valleys and hill ranges of the innermost Aravalis. The forests support mainly Dhok and Salar with scattered trees of Semal (*Salmalia malabarica*), Gurjan, Karaya, etc. on the hill slopes, and a miscellaneous crop of Dhak (*Butea monosperma*), *Terminalia* spp., Mahuwa (*Madhuca latifolia*), *Bridelia retusa*, and bamboos in the valleys.

It is famous for chinkara, chital, sambar, bear, panther, and wild boar which can be seen while driving on the Sanctuary roads. Stray tigers are also met with. Grey partridge, spurfowl, and quail can be seen on the Sanctuary roads.

Jai Samand Lake is situated on the eastern boundary of the sanctuary and provides good boating facilities.

## MOUNT ABU

The Sanctuary is situated on the plateau of Mount Abu, extending over 40 sq. miles of sub-tropical evergreen forests. The main species occurring are *Anogeissus sericea*, *Mangifera indica*, Khajur (*Phoenix sylvestris*), Bar (*Ficus bengalensis*), and shrubs like *Carissa spinarum*, *Caesalpinia* spp., and *Zizyphus* spp. The topography is characterised by deep, well-wooded valleys, steep mountainous slopes, and huge granitic boulders scattered all over. Wildlife consists of sloth bear, panther, sambar, chinkara, and chital, and occasionally a tiger. Grey junglefowl, crested tits, bee-eaters, bulbuls, shrikes are some of the conspicuous birds. Since the sanctuary has been created very recently, it is still in the making.

The nearest rail-head is Abu Road on the Delhi-Ahmedabad metre-gauge line. It is 18 miles from the sanctuary and is well connected by bus and taxi services.

Mount Abu is famous for its pleasant and healthy climate throughout the year. Delwara and Achalnath Jain temples are other big attractions for the visitors. Guru Shikhar, 5653 ft. above m.s.l., makes an enjoyable excursion.

## GHANA BIRD SANCTUARY

The heronry has attained international fame and is a show place for visitors and tourists in general, and of particular interest to ornithologists and bird photographers. It is a low-lying freshwater marsh which is flooded during rains. It is well wooded with medium-sized Babul (*Acacia arabica*) and Ber (*Zizyphus* spp.). There are a few tall Kadam (*Myrtagyna parvifolia*) trees, where eagles, hawks, and whitenecked storks nest. Numerous cormorants, egrets, spoonbills, darters, storks, herons arrive and nest on the trees during the rains. Thousands of migratory duck, teal, cranes geese, even Siberian cranes, arrive during winter. The whole atmosphere is filled with duck calls and occasional crane trumpets during winter.

It is situated 30 miles from the Taj and 110 miles from New Delhi on the Delhi-Bombay rail route of the Western Railway. At the nearest railway station Bharatpur, only 4 miles away, local transport is always available. There is a good network of roads and all places in the sanctuary are within walking distances. Small canoes make it possible to reach almost every nest. In evening drives herds of nilgai, chital and blackbuck can be seen from the sanctuary roads.

The table opposite shows the best time to visit the sanctuaries.